



**Statement of the Honorable Valerie Brown**

**Supervisor, Sonoma County, California**

**Before the**

**Government Reform Committee**

**Subcommittee on**

**Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources**

**United States House of Representatives**

**On behalf of**

**National Association of Counties**

**“Fighting Meth in America’s Heartland:  
Assessing the Impact on Local Law Enforcement and  
Child Welfare Agencies”**

**July 26, 2005**

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Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Cummings and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Valerie Brown and I am a County Supervisor from Sonoma County, California. I am a member of NACo's Health Steering Committee and a representative of NACo's Methamphetamine Action Group.

### **About the National Association of Counties**

Established in 1935, the National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization representing county governments in Washington, DC. Over 2,000 of the 3,066 counties in the United States are members of NACo, representing over 85 percent of the population. NACo provides an extensive line of services including legislative, research, technical, and public affairs assistance, as well as enterprise services to its members. The association acts as a liaison with other levels of government, works to improve public understanding of counties, serves as a national advocate for counties and provides them with resources to help them find innovative methods to meet the challenges they face. In addition, NACo is involved in a number of special projects that deal with such issues as the environment, sustainable communities, volunteerism and intergenerational studies.

NACo's membership drives the policymaking process in the association through 11 policy steering committees that focus on a variety of issues including agriculture, human services, health, justice and public safety and transportation. Complementing these committees are two bi-partisan caucuses—the Large Urban County Caucus and the Rural Action Caucus—to articulate the positions of the association. The Large Urban County Caucus represents the 100 largest populated counties across the nation, which is approximately 49 percent of the nation's population. Similarly, the Rural Action Caucus (RAC) represents rural county commissioners from any of the 2,187 non-metropolitan or rural counties. Since its inception in 1997, RAC has grown substantially and now includes approximately 1,000 rural county officials.

### **Methamphetamine**

Methamphetamine or meth is a highly addictive homemade amphetamine that can be made from commonly found chemicals, such as pseudoephedrine, anhydrous ammonia, lye, phosphorous and antifreeze. Meth is an insidious drug that is cheap to produce, can be easily manufactured in virtually any setting; a car, house or deserted area. The drug can be smoked, snorted, injected or swallowed and releases an intense high for hours. Harmful long-term health risks from meth abuse include tooth and bone loss, damage to the user's brain, liver and kidneys, heart attack and stroke. Children who are exposed to the toxic chemicals during production of methamphetamine can also develop these conditions. In addition, the prolonged use of the drug, called "tweaking", can keep users up for days or weeks at a time. Consequently, the psychological side effects of meth use include paranoia, anger, panic, hallucinations, confusion, incessant talking and convulsions. Many of these lead to violent aggressive acts and suicide.

According to the most recent national data, 607,000 people were "current" users of meth—having used the drug sometime within the 30 days before being surveyed. Over the previous year, 1.3 million people had used meth.

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Historically, meth abuse was confined to the Western United States and to rural areas. However, the drug has quickly spread East and is having disastrous consequences in rural, urban and suburban communities nationwide.

**Impacts of Methamphetamine Abuse on County Governments**

County governments are on the front-line in dealing with the painful and costly consequences of methamphetamine abuse and production. The United States Drug Enforcement Agency estimates that 70-80 percent of methamphetamine is produced in “superlabs” in Mexico and California with the remaining 20-30 percent produced in “small toxic labs”. These labs pose a significant risk to their community and represent the largest problem for local law enforcement. Investigating and busting small toxic labs, incarcerating and adjudicating meth users and cleaning up former meth labs are searing a hole in county budgets. County correction facilities are being overwhelmed by the increase in the number of meth related crimes and associated incarceration costs including mental health treatment, dental and other treatment costs. The need for and cost of county public defender services are also increasing at alarming rates because of the meth epidemic.

There are also many societal effects caused by meth abuse. In an alarming number of meth arrests, there is a child living in the home. These children many times suffer from neglect and physical and sexual abuse.

Meth labs pose a significant danger in the community because they contain highly flammable and explosive materials. Local first responders must be trained on how to identify and respond to meth labs in their communities. Additionally, for each pound of methamphetamine produced, five to seven pounds of toxic waste remain, which is often introduced into the environment via streams, septic systems and surface water run-off.

Meth abuse is a complex, difficult, growing problem that must be solved by cooperation among all levels of government and involvement by our citizenry. NACo is in the early stages of a national campaign to fight methamphetamine abuse. The primary objective of this initiative is to promote action by Congress and the Administration to control and reduce the production, distribution and abuse of methamphetamine, including assistance to counties in responding comprehensively to the problem locally. We look forward to working with this subcommittee and your colleagues on this undertaking.

As part of this initiative, NACo President and Umatilla County, Oregon Commissioner Bill Hansell has appointed a cross-cutting work group that has county representatives from all perspectives of the issue. The charge of our Methamphetamine Action Group is to further assess the impacts of meth abuse on county governments, educate county officials and the public on the dangers of the drug and identify best practices and local approaches that address education, prevention, enforcement, cleanup and treatment of meth challenges.

This afternoon, I would like to make three key points:

- **First, as NACo’s two recent surveys confirmed, methamphetamine abuse is a national drug crisis that requires national leadership.**

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- **Second, a comprehensive approach is needed to combat the methamphetamine epidemic. Necessary components would include law enforcement, treatment, prevention, education, public health, cleanup, research and precursor control.**
- **Third, existing programs, such as the Justice Assistance Grant program, foster care, and mental health and substance abuse programs are critical to the fight against methamphetamine and needed to combat this terrible drug.**

**First, as NACo's two recent surveys confirmed, methamphetamine abuse is a national drug crisis that requires national leadership.**

On July 5, 2005 NACo released two surveys on the methamphetamine crisis that has swept the nation. In the first survey, entitled, *The Criminal Effect of Meth on Communities*, is based on results from 500 county law enforcement agencies from 45 states. The counties that participated in the survey are representative of all counties nationally based on population and regional representation.

Meth is a growing problem that is now national in scope. Of the 500 responding law enforcement agencies, 87 percent report increases in meth related arrests starting three years ago. The states reporting a 100 percent increase in meth related arrests during the last three years include Indiana, California, Minnesota, Florida and Ohio. Furthermore, Iowa and Mississippi reported a 95 percent increase and Illinois and North Dakota reported a 91 percent increase.

Additionally, 58 percent of county law enforcement agencies reported that meth is their largest drug problem. Meth outpaced cocaine at 19 percent, marijuana at 17 percent and heroin at 3 percent. In certain regions of the country, the percentages are even higher. In the Southwest, 76 percent of the counties said that meth is the biggest drug problem. In the Northwest, 75 percent said it was the top problem and by 67 percent of the counties in the Upper Midwest.

Meth related arrests represent a high proportion of crimes requiring incarceration. Fifty percent of the counties estimated that 1 in 5 of their current jail inmates are there because of meth related crimes. The problem is even worse in the other half of the counties surveyed. Seventeen percent of the counties report that more than half of their populations are incarcerated because of meth related crimes.

Stopping the small meth lab operations continues to be a problem. Concerning lab seizures, 62 percent said that meth lab seizures increased in their counties in the last three years.

Other crimes are increasing as a result of meth. Seventy percent of the responding officials say that robberies or burglaries have increased because of meth use, while 62 percent report increases in domestic violence. In addition, simple assaults at 53 percent and identity thefts 27 percent have also increased because of meth use. Sonoma County's Sheriff's department reports that 85 to 90 percent of our drug arrests are related to meth.

The increased presence of meth in many counties across the nation has increased the workload of 82 percent of the responding counties. These increased law enforcement activities from meth abuse are straining law enforcement budgets. Fifty-two percent of counties stated that they are

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paying more overtime, while 13 percent have changed work assignments to accommodate the increase need for policing.

**The Impact of Meth on Children**

As law enforcement officials are clamping down on the manufacture and use of meth, they are finding a disturbing side effect. Many children are being grossly neglected by their addicted parents and these same children are being exposed to the harmful side effects of the production of the drug if they live in close proximity to a lab.

To assess this problem, NACo surveyed 303 counties from all 13 states where child welfare activities are performed at the county level to assess the danger to children and families from meth abuse.

Forty percent of all the child welfare officials in the survey report increased out of home placements because of meth in the last year. During the past five years, 71 percent of the responding counties in my home state of California reported an increase in out of home placements because of meth and 70 percent of Colorado counties reported an increase. The results in the Midwest are frighteningly similar. More than 69 percent of counties in Minnesota reported a growth in out of home placements because of meth during the last year, as did 54 percent of the responding counties in North Dakota. In addition, 59 percent of county officials reported meth has increased the difficulty of re-uniting families.

Sonoma County is no exception. Just six years ago meth was the first or second drug of choice for approximately 21 percent of our clients and today it is involved in more than 41 percent of our cases. The effect on our child welfare agency is devastating. For example, in the last six months 20 percent of the infants we had to remove from their homes were due to meth use.

These drugs are often hidden in plain sight and are often accessible to very young children. In Sonoma, we have had several cases where children have ingested methamphetamine. In one case, a two-year old girl was left in the car unsupervised while her parents were visiting friends. The child found a bag of meth, bit into it and as a result ingested some of the residue. Subsequently, she developed significant behavioral reactions to the drug and had to be removed from the home.

Meth use is not limited to rural counties, nor is it limited to the West and Midwest. As a follow-up to the NACo report, one of our affiliate associations, the National Association of County Human Services Administrators, conducted an informal survey. Sacramento County, California, a large urban county, discovered that meth was involved in 70 percent of the family cases referred to court services due to substance abuse. Wilkes County, North Carolina reported that methamphetamine abuse has had the most significant negative impact of anything their child protective services workers have ever encountered.

**Second, a comprehensive and intergovernmental approach is needed to combat the methamphetamine epidemic. Necessary components would include law enforcement, treatment, prevention, education, public health, cleanup, research and precursor control.**

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NACo believes that a comprehensive and intergovernmental approach is required to fight the methamphetamine epidemic. A multi-faceted strategy that includes prevention, law enforcement, treatment, education, public health, cleanup, research and precursor control is required to fight this crisis.

Several collaborative efforts on the local level have endorsed this approach. For example, the San Diego County Methamphetamine Strike Force includes representatives from the federal, state and local levels of government. Federal officials include the Drug Enforcement Agency, the U.S. Attorney's office and Customs Services. State agencies on the Strike Force include the California Department of Corrections, the California Border Alliance Group, and the California Department of Justice. Local agencies represent a variety of perspectives including the courts, law enforcement, health and human services, environmental services and education.

Another example is in Pierce County, Washington, where county officials have developed a Drug Endangered Children's protocol for children found present at a meth lab. Additionally, when responding to a potential meth lab incident, Pierce County law enforcement officials are accompanied by a social worker to immediately assess the child's condition and recommend a course of action. Pierce County Sheriff Paul Pastor recently spoke at NACo's Western Interstate Region conference on the scourge of meth abuse in Pierce County. Pastor noted that, "merely using law enforcement to fight meth does not help." He continued, by saying, "it takes a multi-discipline approach. Prevention and treatment are also critical."

Similarly, Merced County, California, where 67 to 75 percent of its child welfare cases are meth related, the county child welfare agency has partnered with law enforcement and public health to form a Drug Endangered Children's team and has assigned a full time social worker to assist in drug lab raids. In response to the growing epidemic, the county is about to assign a second social worker to the teams.

Other critical components include prevention, research, treatment, education. Just last week at the NACo Annual Conference, county officials were heartened to learn that the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy will be airing awareness ads on methamphetamine to educate individuals on the dangers of the drug.

Additionally, one potential research breakthrough has already been achieved. Iowa State University researchers have developed an additive to anhydrous ammonia that can reduce the production value of meth, while still being a useful fertilizer.

Treatment has been proven effective when it is available and the individual is willing to accept it. The Matrix Model, consists of a 16-week intervention that includes intensive group and individual therapy to promote behavioral changes needed to remain off drugs.

Education and prevention efforts must be increased to inform children and youth about the dangers of methamphetamine abuse. Many former meth users indicate that they did not know of the ingredients and dangerous consequences of the drug before their first use.

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Lastly, NACo believes that restricting the sale of precursors, such as pseudoephedrine, on the national level has great promise. Many states have seen dramatic reductions in meth lab seizures by restricting precursor sales. NACo also believes that eliminating the current blister pack exemption is a necessary step to impede meth production.

**Third, existing programs, such as the Justice Assistance Grant program, foster care, and substance abuse treatment are critical to the fight against methamphetamine and needed to combat this terrible drug.**

The FY2006 Bush administration budget request eliminated \$804 million for the Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) program, including \$170 million in discretionary funds. Currently, this funding is targeted to local law enforcement agencies for a variety of purposes including law enforcement, education, prevention and treatment. Many local governments are using this funding for multi-jurisdictional regional drug taskforces. County officials from across the nation have spoken out on the critical need for this funding. Without federal support for local law enforcement through the Justice Assistance Grant program, many of these multi-jurisdictional taskforces, particularly in rural America, would no longer exist. Therefore, NACo is calling on Congress to fully fund the Justice Assistance Grant program within the FY2006 Science, State, Justice and Commerce appropriations bill.

Over the last two years, the Administration's budget has included a proposal to allow states to turn their foster care program into from an open-ended entitlement a capped allocation with greater flexibility. While NACo supports greater flexibility in the foster care program, a proposal such as this is extremely dangerous. If the counties that are experiencing an increase in foster care caseloads because of methamphetamine use had been operating under a capped allocation, they would not have had the resources to respond quickly.

**Conclusion**

On behalf of NACo, I would like to thank Chairman Souder and Ranking Member Cummings for holding this hearing today. As our two surveys have confirmed, methamphetamine abuse is a scourge on our society that must be addressed in a comprehensive manner by all forms of government. NACo looks forward to working with Congress and the administration to craft and implement such legislation. Additionally, NACo is encouraged by the attention that methamphetamine abuse has received recently by the media and policymakers in Congress and the administration. Just last week, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales stated that, "in terms of damage to children and to our society, meth is now the most dangerous drug in America—a problem that has surpassed marijuana." Lastly, NACo will be conducting several additional surveys on other aspects of the methamphetamine epidemic, including treatment and public health. We would welcome the opportunity to come before this subcommittee and present our findings at the appropriate time. Again, we thank the Chairman and members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to submit testimony on the methamphetamine crisis facing this nation.